

Michigan State Legislature Education Committee

Testimony on HB 4822 (2015)

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Madame Chair and members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you concerning HB 4822.

I'm Dr. David C. Winters, a resident of Ypsilanti Township, and I am speaking as an individual in opposition to this bill. I am currently an Associate Professor at Eastern Michigan University in the Department of Special Education. I have worked with individuals (children through adults) with reading difficulties and their teachers for over 35 years. Most recently I have been involved in the development of a national certification exam for teachers of reading that strives to insure our reading teachers and reading/literacy coaches have a well-rounded, grounded understanding of literacy (both reading and writing), including principles of assessment and instructional delivery. Because of my interest in reading, writing, and literacy disabilities, I have been involved with the International Dyslexia Association since 1979, having served as president of two branches, and I am currently on the Board of Directors of the Michigan branch. In addition, before moving to Michigan in 2009, I was the Executive Director of Clinical Affairs for the Children's Dyslexia Centers where I helped develop the tutor training program and oversaw both tutor training and instructional delivery at 59 Centers spread throughout 15 states.

I believe that the goal of HB 4822 is admirable in that it recognizes that too many of our state's children are not learning to read as they should. This bill also recognizes that something must be done about this situation. For that I am thankful. However, as currently written, the bill raises several significant concerns that lead me to speak in opposition to it this morning. The primary concerns I have include

- A focus on test-based retention,
- The structure for parent involvement, and
- Inadequate qualifications for reading/literacy coaches.

I'll begin with the bill's focus of test-based retention of third grade students, which is modeled after a bill implemented in Florida since 2003. While the Green and Winters (no relation) 2006 study "Getting Farther Ahead by Staying Behind" showed significant gains of third-grade retained students, it did not look at the effect over time. However, a 2013 study by Schwerdt and West considered both the short- and long-term effects of retention on reading and found that, while a short-term significant gain did exist, that gain disappeared within five years. These studies suggested that the intensive intervention during the second year in third grade contributed to those short-term gains. If that is the case, why not start this level of intensity in first or second grade rather than require a student to repeat third grade before receiving this intensive help? In addition, a 2015 study by Özek found that third-grade retained students in Florida were more likely to have disciplinary incidents and receive suspensions for up to two years after the retention. These students included those very near the cutoff score, primarily those who were economically disadvantaged, especially African-Americans, and males. Finally, Huddleston's 2014 literature review included findings that, while retention often resulted in short-term gains, unintended consequences included an increased risk of dropping-out of school and cheating, among others. Given this evidence, this bill's primary focus on retention as a tool to improve literacy among Michigan students is questionable.

Second, the bill includes provision of a "parent contract". While I suspect that we all agree that research has clearly indicated the positive effects of parent support and involvement in a student's academic success, the primary responsibility for the child's learning to read rests with the school. However, page 5, lines 23-24 state that the reading/literacy coach is to, "provide tools to assist the parent or legal guardian to engage in intervention." Furthermore, the "parental contract" noted on pages 7, line 23, page 8, line 22, and page 12 line 6, infers a formal, seemingly binding, document; however, the bill does not include provisions for enforcement or consequences if a parent does not follow through with this contract. This contract provision also appears to shift instructional delivery and/or responsibility to the child's parent(s).

The third primary concern is that the qualifications for the reading/literacy coaches fall short of what these individuals will need to fully respond to struggling students. While the bill contains many good qualifications for reading/literacy coaches, I find it surprising that it lacks criteria for knowledge of or expertise in teaching structured literacy, which involves both reading and writing, especially when instruction in structured literacy can significantly help these struggling students (Donah, 2012). A reading/literacy coach without this critical component will not be sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of students or those working with them. In addition, the bill does not require the reading/literacy coach to have a foundation in specific reading disabilities, or dyslexia, as I like to call it, even though many of these students exhibit those characteristics.

I'd like to share more about this bill, including suggestions for improvement; however, my time is gone. Please feel free to contact me for further discussion so that we can better impact all of Michigan's students.

Works Cited

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